

Protests halt drilling auction near Mon Forest

By Paul J. Nyden
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CHARLESTON, W.Va. --

Conservation groups succeeded Friday in stopping the federal Bureau of Land Management from auctioning publicly owned oil and gas reserves under the Monongahela National Forest near Spruce Knob.

The Center for Biological Diversity, Wilderness Society and Friends of Blackwater were among the groups warning that oil and gas development would threaten endangered bats, a native brook trout fishery, clean water and scenic resources inside the forest.

The BLM had planned to auction those reserves as part of a broader sale including land and resources in Ohio, Alabama, Arkansas and other states.

Mollie Matteson, of the Center for Biological Diversity, said, "Endangered bats are dying of white-nose syndrome a few miles from these drill sites, yet the Forest Service wants to put toxic drill pits in their habitat, and potentially disrupt the caves they live in."

Over the last three years, the newly emerging "white-nose syndrome" disease has killed more than 1 million bats in the eastern United States. Last year, the disease was first discovered in West Virginia in a Pendleton County cave that is a major home for rare bats.

Judy Rodd, director of Friends of Blackwater, said, "Once more, the Forest Service put up sites for oil and gas development, but failed to do the analysis and consultation that would ensure better protections for our wildlife, clean water, and underground cave systems. Once more, we pointed this out in our protest, and we won."

Eight other groups filed protests, including: Trout Unlimited, the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition and the National Wildlife Federation.

Oil and gas drilling, particularly drilling that uses "hydrofracking," can contaminate streams, groundwater and wells.

Hydrofracking -- hydraulic fracturing -- creates fractures and fissures in underground rocks, a process enhanced when fluids are injected to extend those fractures.

Conservation groups worried the geology in Pendleton and Randolph counties, which includes many underground fissures and channels, made local water resources particularly vulnerable to pollution problems from hydrofracking.

As energy prices rise, conservationists worry oil and gas drilling may proliferate in national forests without careful review and environmental protections.